

## ***Civil War Battles: The Reporter's Perspective WebQuest***

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I have spent the past several years battling "topical research." The traditional country, decade, state, animal, or battle report is a useless exercise in an information-rich landscape, where locating the information needed for such reports requires little more than a printout from an online reference source. Such reports amount to busy work, and our students know it. They need deeper encounters with information. Students should have opportunities to analyze and compare, to look at issues from multiple perspectives, and to use the information they collect in meaningful ways.

One of our school's American history teachers, a major Civil War buff, recently gave me the opportunity to work on a deeper approach. Each semester in preparation for a field trip to Gettysburg, the teacher assigned reports on Civil War battles. During the past year we decided to tweak those battle reports a bit.

The [Civil War Battles WebQuest: The Reporter's Perspective](http://mciu.org/~spjvweb/civilwarwq.html) (<http://mciu.org/~spjvweb/civilwarwq.html>) is our effort to encourage students to explore how a battle might be reported from the perspective of either a northern or southern journalist. Along the way, students also examine visual documents and learn the basics of desktop publishing.

We purposely chose a newsletter as our product because war journalism improved dramatically during the Civil War. For the first time, correspondents traveled to the front and were able to relay their stories via telegraph to readers back home, desperate for current news of their loved ones.



**Atlanta, Ga. Gen. William T. Sherman on horseback at Federal Fort No. 7**  
[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/cwar:@field\(NUMBER+@band\(cwp+4a39954\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/cwar:@field(NUMBER+@band(cwp+4a39954)))

We assigned students the dangerous duty of "covering" a battle. They were encouraged to create period-appropriate interviews and stories, weaving together facts of the battles, quotes from real soldiers and witnesses, maps, photographs, and artifacts they might have found at the site. They were urged to display some bias and to take license in exaggerating heroism. While students were expected to write historically accurate stories, they learned in the process that truth may well be the first casualty of war!

In creating their newsletters, students were required to use images from two American Memory collections—[Selected Civil War Photographs](http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/cwphtml/cwphome.html) (<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/cwphtml/cwphome.html>) and the [Civil War Maps](http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/gmdhtml/cwmhtml/cwmhome.html) (<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/gmdhtml/cwmhtml/cwmhome.html>). The images offered immediacy and inspired student writing. The maps served to clarify and help students explain battle strategies. An article explaining how geography influenced the outcome of the battle was a required element in the newsletter.

In addition to drawing students into the superb American Memory collections and the many Civil War web sites, this project helped us to promote our huge print Civil War collection and proved to students the value of these sources.

The teacher was impressed with the student products and has asked me to help him create similar activities for his world history classes. We found that students were completely engaged in their work, far more so than when asked to write a simple report on a battle.



**Genl. Sherman's campaign war map.**

[http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/gmd:@filreq\(@field\(NUMBER+@band\(g3921s+cw0124000\)\)+@field\(COLLID+cwmap\)\)](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/gmd:@filreq(@field(NUMBER+@band(g3921s+cw0124000))+@field(COLLID+cwmap)))